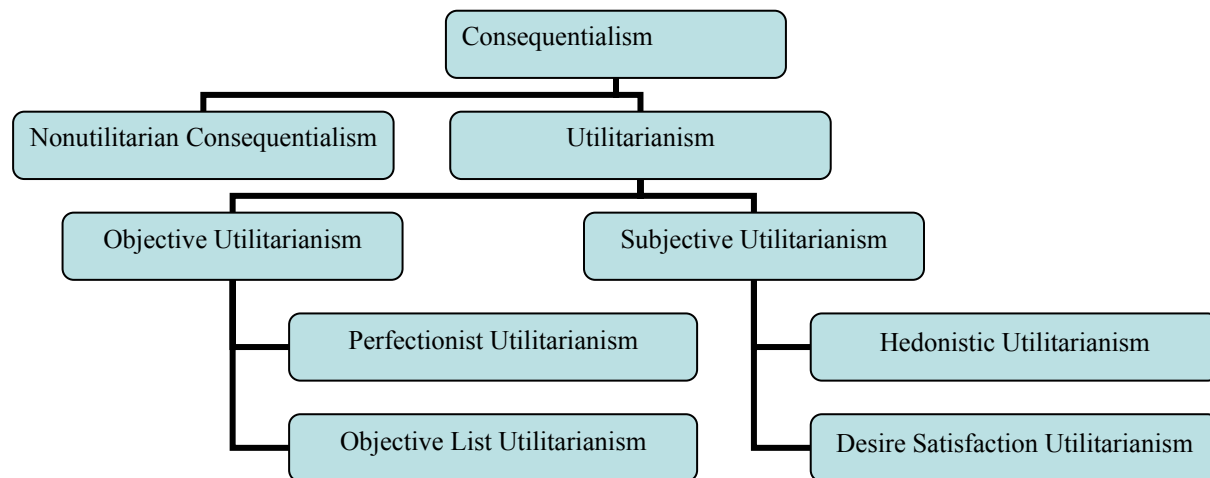


PHIL 167: Contemporary Political Philosophy
 Fall 2005; David O. Brink
 Handout #1: Consequentialism and Utilitarianism

Consequentialism is a kind of moral theory that assesses things – actions, persons, policies, and institutions – by the value of their consequences. **Utilitarians** are consequentialists with a **welfarist** theory of value, that is, who focus on **welfare**, **well-being**, or **happiness** as the relevant consequence. There are a number of different theoretical choices to be made within the consequentialist and utilitarian families, especially about how to understand value and how to understand the function from value to duty or obligation.

Different conceptions of utilitarianism result from different conceptions of happiness or well-being. Some, such as Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), interpret happiness in **subjective** terms as consisting in or depending importantly upon the person's contingent and variable psychological states. For instance, **hedonism** claims that happiness consists in pleasure and the absence of pain. Pleasure might be thought of as a qualitatively homogenous mental state or sensation or, alternatively, as any mental state or sensation that one wants to continue and will, *ceteris paribus*, take steps to prolong. Similarly, pain might be thought of as a qualitatively homogeneous mental state or sensation or, alternatively, as any mental state or sensation that one dislikes and will, *ceteris paribus*, take steps to discontinue. Others construe happiness as consisting in the **satisfaction of actual or idealized desire**. Still others conceive of happiness or welfare in more objective terms as consisting in **perfection** (e.g. the realization of one's essential capacities) or some **list of objective goods** (e.g. knowledge, achievement, friendship).



These distinctions turn on the evaluative assumptions one incorporates into consequentialism and utilitarianism. Subjective theories of value have the virtue of accommodating a kind of **pluralism** about value that recognizes different kinds of activities and lives as valuable. But they go beyond pluralism and embrace **content-neutrality** about the good insofar as they recognize no inherent constraints on the content of good lives.

Extreme subjectivism about value, such as hedonism, claims that the good consists in mental states alone. But we might doubt this. Consider the case of the **Deluded Schoolboy**. A lonely and miserable schoolboy develops an all-consuming desire to be the most popular boy in school. His classmates, who despise him, orchestrate a cruel hoax to stage a mock contest in which he is elected the most popular boy in school. Deceived by the hoax, the boy is euphoric. But noting how his euphoria rests on false beliefs, we are unlikely to judge his state good. Indeed, we might think that the boy's contentment makes his state more contemptible.

Or, consider Robert Nozick's **Experience Machine**, which gives people whatever experiences they desire.

Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences [Anarchy, State, and Utopia, p. 42]?

The answer, as Nozick notes, seems clearly to be No, at least in part because, as Nozick also notes, one wants to be a certain kind of person and do certain sorts of things and not merely have experiences as if one were such a person, doing such things. Indeed, we typically value the experiences we do only because we believe them to have been produced by the activities and relationships that we value independently. This thought experiment suggests that a valuable life involves certain character traits, the exercise of certain capacities, and the possession of certain relationships to others and the world and, hence, that value cannot consist in psychological states alone.

These examples do not threaten **moderate subjectivism**, such as the desire satisfaction view, which claims that what is valuable depends upon, but need not consist in, one's psychological states. Though the schoolboy and the client of the experience machine are (ex hypothesi) satisfied, neither has his desires satisfied. For the schoolboy wants to be popular and not merely seem popular, and the client has desires to be a certain sort of person and do certain sorts of things.

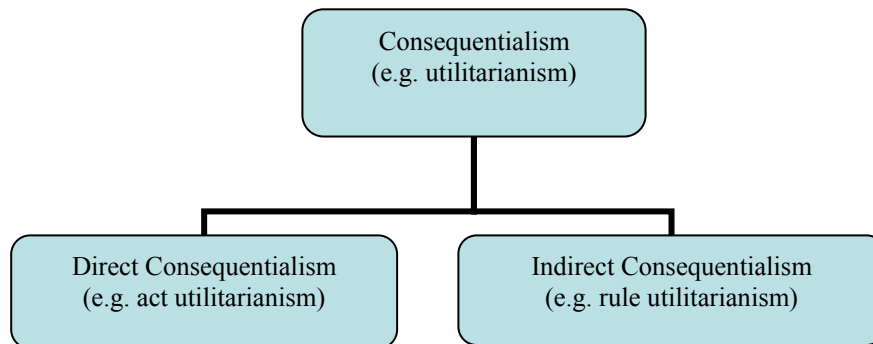
We might notice something a little odd about the desire-satisfaction or preference-satisfaction view of an individual's well-being or happiness. For that view places no constraints on the content of a person's desires. Some of my desires will be self-regarding, but others not. I may desire that world hunger end, that a vaccine for AIDS be discovered, or that my boyhood hockey rival fail in life. Satisfying the first two desires may be good, and we may wonder about the value of satisfying the last. But it's not clear that satisfying any of them is good for me. The unrestricted desire-satisfaction view seems to conflate **what interests me** and **what is in my interest** or, alternatively, **what I value** and **what is valuable for me**.

However, let us set this worry aside in order to concentrate on another. We sometimes judge that people who are satisfying their deepest desires nonetheless lead impoverished lives, because their desires are for unimportant or inappropriate things. Consider the situation in Aldous Huxley's dystopia Brave New World. Deltas and Epsilons form the working classes who are genetically engineered and psychologically programmed to acquiesce in and indeed embrace intellectually and emotionally limited lives that are liberally seasoned with mood altering drugs. Deltas and Epsilons lead contented lives precisely because they are satisfying their chief desires. They've got what they want. It's their desires that are frightening. While a certain amount of realism in one's ambitions and desires is sometimes a good thing, we do not (in general) increase

the value of our lives by lowering our sights, even if by doing so we increase the frequency of our successes.

Our reservations about subjectivism about value might make us look more favorably on objective conceptions of welfare or happiness. Objective conceptions could certainly explain our reservations about subjectivism. But are they more plausible? In particular, can they capture some suitably modest form of pluralism about the good without embracing content-neutrality? That's a question we should bear in mind as we study the contrast between Benthamite and Millian utilitarianism.

Another set of distinctions within consequentialism are orthogonal to these. Some conceptions of consequentialism and utilitarianism are **direct**; they assess whatever it is they assess (for instance, actions) in terms of the value of its consequences. The standard example of direct utilitarianism is **act utilitarianism**, which says that one is morally obligated to perform that action, among the available options, that produces the most happiness (or an action whose consequences for human happiness are at least as good as any other action available to the agent). Some conceptions of utilitarianism are **indirect**, making the moral assessment of something depend not on its utility but on its conformity to rules or motives that have good or optimal consequences. A standard form of indirect utilitarianism is **rule utilitarianism**, which says that one is morally obligated to conform one's behavior to rules that have optimal acceptance value, relative to other possible rules.



We will see that there is considerable controversy over whether Mill is a direct or indirect utilitarian. Some have interpreted him as an act utilitarian, some as a rule utilitarian, and some as an indirect utilitarian that identifies duty with conduct whose omission it is useful to blame.